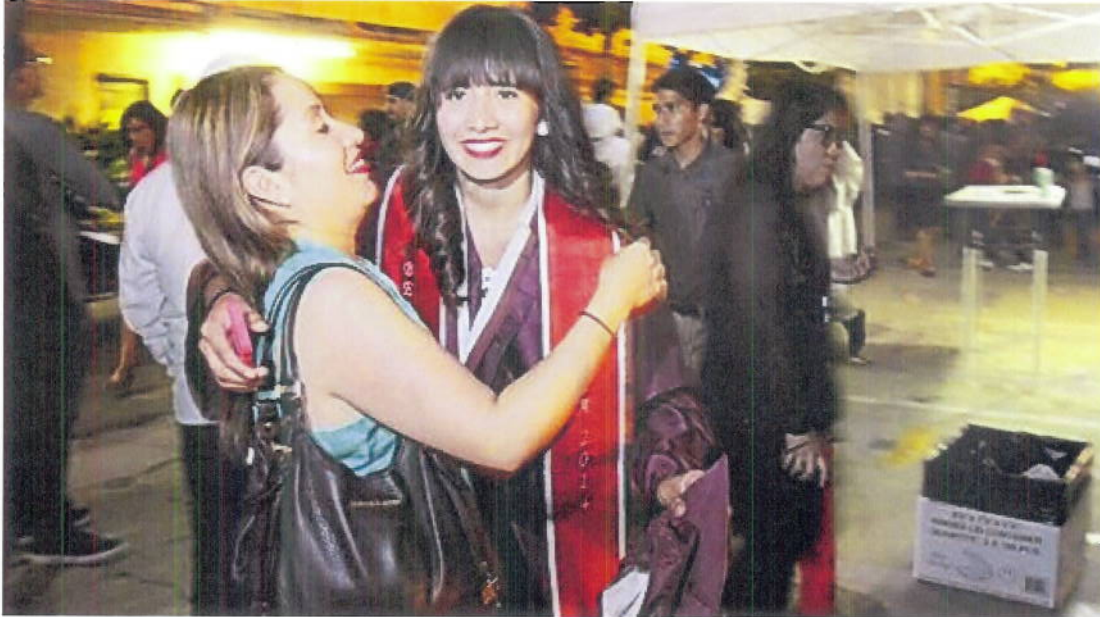


Program helps L.A. County foster youths become high school grads



L.A. County social worker Alicia Aguayo, left, hugs Alicia Rodriguez, a foster youth who recently graduated from Bell Gardens High School and will be heading to Cal State Dominguez Hills in the fall. (Lawrence K. Ho, Los Angeles Times)

By **ABBY SEWELL**

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Family and friends of the 600-some graduating Bell Gardens High School seniors poured into the bleachers at East Los Angeles College on Thursday night.

They carried — against the directives of school officials — balloons, signs spelling out congratulatory messages, giant teddy bears, confetti and noisemakers.

Seated in the crowd, Alicia Aguayo and Erika Hernandez scanned the students filing onto the field until they spotted 17-year-old Alicia Rodriguez, a tall girl with bangs and an orange sash over her purple robe. "There she is!"

Unlike most of her classmates, Alicia Rodriguez' birth parents and siblings weren't there to see her walk across the stage. Instead, her foster mother and sister were in the crowd, along with

Aguayo and Hernandez, the Los Angeles County social worker and tutor who had helped her make it to graduation.

Alicia will start at Cal State Dominguez Hills in the fall. From there she will go on, she hopes, to UCLA and a career in pediatric oncology.

She has already beaten the odds. Statewide, 58% of foster youths graduated from high school their senior year in 2009-10, compared with 84% in the general population, according to a comprehensive study funded by the nonprofit Stuart Foundation and released last year.

A program in Los Angeles County has been aiming to reverse that trend — so far, with apparent success. It began as a pilot program in Supervisor Gloria Molina's Eastside district in 2008 and expanded countywide two years ago. Under the initiative, a group of social workers tracks the academic progress of foster children and makes sure they stay on the path to graduation.

A few social workers, like Aguayo, are embedded in schools and focused solely on the youths' education. Others are allowed to carry a reduced regular caseload, including monitoring placements and writing court reports, in addition to their work in the schools.

The program was one of the few given high marks in a largely critical report by a blue ribbon commission convened to assess the county's child welfare system.

Initially, Molina paid for four social workers assigned full-time to the Montebello and Pomona school districts out of her office's discretionary budget. Now she is preparing to add five more. The Department of Children and Family Services pays for 26 other social workers who are assigned to the program in various parts of the county. The workers monitor foster youths in 10 school districts, including Los Angeles Unified.

According to statistics provided by aides to Molina and Family Services, 83% of those served by the initiative who were high school seniors graduated last year.

Alicia has been in the program throughout her high school career. She has bounced from one foster home to another since she was 10, never reuniting with her birth parents and two younger brothers. One foster mother planned to adopt her when she was in middle school, Alicia said, but the adoption fell through when the private agency they were working with closed down.

Aguayo and Hernandez, Alicia said, have "been like a family to me," even though they've been working with her only a year or so. They took her on college tours and helped her apply for scholarships. They helped her choose a prom dress and listened when she felt down about being separated from her original family. On graduation night, when Alicia was so flustered

that she forgot her mortarboard at home, Aguayo ran back to pick it up and return in time for the ceremony.

"They made me realize there's people who actually care about you," Alicia said.

The Family Services department has not tracked graduation rates for foster youth countywide. But Steve Sturm, a program manager in the department's education section, said, "Most definitely our kids do have more struggles, more challenges than most."

Part of that has to do with trauma the youths are often dealing with, Sturm said. But in many cases, it's also a matter of logistics: Foster children often move multiple times to live with different foster parents or may return to their families, requiring them to switch schools. Sometimes academic credits are lost in the shuffle and not counted toward graduation. For those in Molina's program, social workers help track down records from previous schools and make sure their credits are counted.

In Alicia's case, Aguayo made sure she could finish high school at Bell Gardens, even though she moved twice during her senior year.

When the last move fell just a month before the end of the school year, Aguayo and one of her colleagues called potential foster families until they found one in nearby Pico Rivera that would allow Rodriguez to stay with them and finish out the year with her class.

"I'm immensely proud," Aguayo said. "It's like seeing your children — they're like our surrogate children graduating."

Of the 42 other youths in Molina's program graduating this year, 10 are headed to four-year colleges. Most are headed to community college and a few to the military.

"Each one had a different challenge," Aguayo said. "For all of our kids, we're just as proud."

Alicia will now take a summer job and enter a "bridge" program at Cal State Dominguez Hills intended to prepare youths like her to succeed in college. She hasn't decided if she wants to move into a dormitory next year or stay with her new foster family, with whom she has quickly bonded. After college, she said, she wants to get "an apartment or a little house" where she can provide a home for her two younger brothers.

At a ceremony at the county Hall of Administration the week before her graduation, Alicia listed the ways the program workers had helped her and told county officials: "I always felt so alone in my life, until they came into my life. I realized I haven't been alone in this success."

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